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Lee Kuan Yew's China Wisdom

By Hoo Tiang Boon

Synopsis

As the rare statesman who has engaged all five generations of Chinese leadership, Lee Kuan Yew had a deep and profound understanding of China. Policymakers and scholars would do no worse than to overlook Lee's insights on the rising power.

Commentary

AMONG THE many abilities that made Mr Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's first prime minister, such a valued and influential interlocutor to foreign leaders and governments was undoubtedly his prodigious and masterly understanding of China. Lee was, in the words of Graham Allison, 'the world's premier China watcher'. This is an accolade attributed to the fact that his assessments of Beijing—frank, unvarnished and sometimes contrarian—often proved to be uncannily correct or prescient.

This was a profound wisdom borne out not just from a scholastic and historical appreciation of the nuances and contradictions of China. It was one honed by Lee's more than 30 visits to China, starting from 1976, and unique friendship and access to several of the top echelons of the Chinese leadership, both past and present. Lee remains the rare statesman who has met with all five Chinese leaders, from Mao Zedong to current President Xi Jinping. Everyone of them since Deng Xiaoping, including Xi, have described Lee as a 'mentor'.

On China's rise

It was thus this blend of ground knowledge, elite relations, historical awareness and intellectualism that enabled Lee to '[spot] the rise of China before anyone else'. Lee believed that once China reversed course to more effectively harness the productive capacities of its people, its rise was only a matter of time.

He had met and found 'very capable minds' during his early visits to China, and could see that once ideology was no longer an encumbrance, China would soar. That was in the 1970s, a time when most people were hardly bullish about China's prospects.

Lee was clear about the psychological underpinnings that fuelled China's rise. At the heart of the

Chinese strategic mindset, he noted, was the fundamental belief that China should be the world's greatest power, like how it was before its ill-fated century of humiliation and reigned supreme as Asia's dominant power. Ergo, Lee saw no reason why China would not want, if it could, to replace the United States as Asia's 'number one' power.

But to achieve this goal, Lee did not think China would be 'foolish' and compete with others, in particular the US, in armaments. Rather, China's strategy would be to 'out-sell and out-build' the rest. Moreover, Lee knew that the Chinese leaders took a long-term perspective on strategic issues, and were prepared to 'bide [their] time' until China becomes powerful enough to 'redefine' the extant order.

One thing Lee did not count on China doing to succeed in its goal is to adopt Western-style liberal democracy. In fact, he was reasonably sure that China would not go down that route, and that 'if it did, it would collapse'. This conclusion stemmed from Lee's recognition that Chinese leaders fear the instability and 'loss of [central] control' which liberal democracy might engender.

Lee himself was not convinced that China should be judged or adopt Western political standards, which he thought do not sufficiently take into account China's past. As he wryly observed, throughout 5000 years of its history, China's rulers 'chopped heads, not count heads'.

It was this sort of thinking which led Lee to conclude quickly that in the wake of the 1989 Tiananmen incident, Deng Xiaoping would act decisively to quell the protests, and that Western diplomatic isolation would not succeed in pressurising China to change its political course.

Leader reader

Lee's reading of the Tiananmen situation was aided by a keen ability to 'figure out' the personalities, thinking and leadership styles of Chinese leaders he met. In Deng, Lee saw a strong-willed leader who was not afraid to make tough decisions when problems came up during China's reform and opening-up process. Five-footer Deng in fact stood so high in Lee's estimation that he considered the former to be 'the most impressive leader he ever met'.

Interestingly, Lee had singled out current Chinese leader Xi Jinping for particular praise. Calling Xi a man with 'iron in his soul' and 'gravitas', Lee saw Xi as being comparable to a leader like Nelson Mandela. Lee's assessment of Xi is telling because in the two years since ascending to the top position in China, Xi has emerged to be widely considered as the most powerful Chinese leader since Deng.

Lee has been described as being 'obsessed' about China. But it is worth emphasising that this was an obsession informed and shaped by a bigger obsession on Singapore's long-term national interests. From the time in the late 1970s when he accurately saw and foretold China's rise, Lee knew that Singapore could not afford to miss the Chinese growth train that was about to take off. As one interviewer of Lee noted, the former prime minister had been 'worried about Singapore being left behind when China got back up to speed'.

It had thus been clear to Lee early on, that with China's impending rise, it would be advantageous for Singapore to get to 'know' the country and its leaders better. This does not mean of course, short of a utilitarian purpose, China held little personal interest to Lee. As a country, China had always occupied Lee's attentions while its size meant that it was simply too big to ignore. But having gazed into and understood the future, China's importance became even more evident to Lee and Singapore.

All this has meant the bequeathment of a legacy and wealth of knowledge on China, captured in Lee's several speeches and interviews as well as writings based on these material. While China is an evolving creature, future generations of China watchers as well as policymakers would do no worse than to overlook Mr. Lee Kuan Yew's insights.

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